

information available from the claim content input to the client web page in a format close to a natural language, for example, information on product units or problems. In the knowledge base search, product units and problems expressed in various local languages are converted to unit codes, problem codes, and error codes using synonym tables shown in FIGS. 6, 7 and 8. The KB section 16 is searched on the basis of these codes. If it is determined in step ST202 that a solution to the similar claims is present in the KB section 16, an answer document based on this solution is automatically produced in step ST203 using a response assistance module 14A. In step ST204, the answer document is issued to the major subsidiary. In this case, the response assistance module 14A produces the answer document so as to meet the technical support policy which differs from market to market. Aside from the above-mentioned synonym tables, it is possible to use tables applicable to cases where different model numbers are assigned to the same models in accordance with different countries. In the synonym tables shown in FIGS. 6 and 7, English and Japanese synonyms are associated. However, these tables may be provided as conversion tables for unifying languages within the system by converting languages such as Japanese or German to English, or a standard language. Thereby, it becomes possible to find a solution to similar claims from major subsidiaries managing other market regions.

**Please replace the paragraph at page 14, lines 5-20, as follows:**

On the other hand, if a solution to the similar claims is not present in the KB section 16, a claim report is newly produced in step ST205 using a report assisting module 14B. The claim report is issued in step ST206. The report assisting module 14B automatically incorporates into the claim report the information available from the content of the claim input to the client web page, and requests input of information which is necessary for a study of a solution by the engineer but is lacking. Based on the information input in response to this request, the claim report is formatted. Specifically, as shown in FIG. 9, the production of the claim report requires information such as a) report source, b) rank of importance, c) claim category, d) claim title, e) claim details, and f) situation.

**Please replace the paragraph at page 14, line 21 to page 15, line 16, as follows:**

FIG. 10 shows details of items c, d, a and f incorporated in the claim report. Item c is prepared for searching for similar claims from a claim category on the

basis of simple coincidence of keywords and codes, and item c includes a product model, a problem code, a unit code, a cause code and an error code. Item d is prepared for searching for similar claims on the basis of the claim title, and item d is produced as a phrase constructed by combining words indicative of definition information items such as a problem, a position and a cause. Examples of the claim title other than that shown in FIG. 9 are "Dark copy image due to poor adjustment in optical unit", "Abnormal noise from drive gear in fuser unit", and "Breakage of front cover due to poor package material." Item e is prepared for searching for similar claims based on claim details and is produced as a free description including items such as a problem, position/related unit, cause and treatment. Item f is prepared for searching for similar claims based on situations, and it is produced to include a part number, software version number, part number indicative of a problem part, and total copy counter value.

**Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 15, lines 17 to page 16, line 11, as follows:**

FIG. 11 illustrates a reporting process for a formatted claim such as the claim report shown in FIG. 9. This reporting process is a process to be performed within the technical support system 1. This process is performed when

the claim report has been issued in the reporting process illustrated in FIG. 5 and when a formatted claim report has been input by choosing on the client web page. In this reporting process, the CH section 14 performs in step ST301 a search for the claim report on the basis of the claim category, claim title, claim details and situation. If it is determined in step ST302 that the claim report has already been registered in the KB section 16, an answering document is automatically produced in step ST303 using the answer assisting module 14A and it is issued to the major subsidiary. In this case, where there is a solution to the claim report, the answer assisting module 14A produces an answering document based the solution. Where there is no solution, the answer assisting module 14A produces an answering document based on the state of progress in the supporting task.

**Please replace the paragraph beginning on page 18, line 24 to page 19, line 10, as follows:**

FIG. 12 shows a stepwise transition of a market countermeasure task carried out for the claim report carried by the whole product technology department. If the claim report is accepted in the product technology department, the content of the claim report is confirmed and verified in a first step VR. The cause is investigated and its solution is

estimated in a second step CE. Trial production and effectiveness test of a countermeasure part is carried out in a third step ET. These steps VR, CE and ET serve as the supporting task. If it is detected from the supporting task that the content of the claim requires part alternation in the future, parts of the countermeasure are prepared for market application in a fourth step, and effectiveness of the countermeasure parts in the market is monitored in a fifth step.

**Please replace the paragraph on page 22, lines 23-27, as follows:**

As for the claim report that exists in the KB section 16 but has no available solution, the progress state of the market countermeasure task is included in the answer document. Thus, clients such as the subsidiary can easily know the time needed to obtain a solution.